



Lisa Bul/The Patriot Ledger

Gurnet Light now stands about 50 feet from the edge of a 45-foot cliff above Plymouth Bay.

# Erosion forces moving of Gurnet Light

By John H. Boit  
The Patriot Ledger

**PLYMOUTH** — The original Gurnet Light survived cannon fire during the Revolutionary War, but its replacement can't escape the ravages of the sea.

Yesterday the Coast Guard announced plans to move the oldest wooden lighthouse in the country, because of concerns about erosion on the end of the barrier beach where it has sat for 154 years.

Chief Warrant Officer Richard Cleary of the First Coast Guard District in Boston said the 43-foot-tall lighthouse will be moved several

hundred feet inland.

The beacon is now about 50 feet from the edge of a 45-foot cliff that drops into Plymouth Bay.

The lighthouse, which is on the National Register of Historic Sites, is one of two towers built in 1843. The other was torn down in 1924.

The first light station on the Gurnet was actually twin lighthouses and was built in 1768. The towers were destroyed by fire in 1801 and a single lighthouse was built in 1843.

But what makes the current lighthouse a treasure is its post-and-beam construction covered in wooden shingles, said Richard Boonisar, president of the United States Lifesaving

Service Heritage Association.

It is the oldest free-standing wooden lighthouse in the country, said Boonisar, a Norwell resident, who plans to move to the Gurnet this summer.

Gurnet would be the third lighthouse in Massachusetts to be moved in about a year. This past summer Highland Light in North Truro was moved 450 feet from the edge of the cliff because of erosion. In the fall Nauset Light in Eastham, which is featured on bags of Cape Cod potato chips and state tourism brochures, was moved 300 feet inland.

Full details of the Gurnet move, including its  
Please see LIGHTHOUSE — Page 8



File photo

**Gurnet Light** — Coast Guard to move the wooden structure.

# Erosion forces moving of Gurnet Light

## ■ LIGHTHOUSE Continued from Page 1

cost, were unavailable yesterday. Cleary said it was planned for the fall and would involve the Army Corps of Engineers and the Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit in Providence, R.I.

No figures were available from the state Department of Environmental Management, which tracks coastal erosion, on the extent of the Gurnet erosion. But Gurnet residents suggest the problem is serious.

"It's devastating. Devastating," said Elaine Nudd, who has lived on the Gurnet year-round for the 18 years. "We've watched it over the years, and we used to think it was six inches or a foot a year. Now it's several feet every year."

The Gurnet is the "elbow" of a thin spit of land shaped like a crooked arm jutting into Duxbury and Plymouth bays. Saquish Head forms the end of the peninsula.

There are about 250 homes on the peninsula, about 50 of which are on the Gurnet. Only eight homes on the Gurnet are used year-round.

At least two homes on the Gurnet have

been moved inland in the past several years because of erosion. Residents interviewed yesterday estimated that erosion has claimed anywhere from 10 to 30 feet of the Gurnet in the past 10 years.

Gurnet residents take pride in their lighthouse, which Nudd referred to as "our local icon."

Last night seasonal resident Joseph Donovan stood at the cliff near the lighthouse, pointing out erosion problems to two friends and talking about the Gurnet Light. For Donovan, moving it is a no-brainer.

"It makes absolute sense to me," he said. "And I'm not a tree-hugger or a historical person. You save it. It's got so much value."

Boonisar said one of the things that makes Gurnet Light unique is that it is still standing after 154 years. "Wooden lighthouses always had one flaw," he said. "They burned down."

But Gurnet Light also has at least three other claims to fame, he said.

It was the first twin light tower in the United States. It is the only lighthouse known to have been struck by canon fire, which happened during the Revolution-

ary War. And, also during the Revolution, the original lighthouse was run by the country's first woman lighthouse keeper.

Boonisar is a fanatic about the history of Gurnet Light, but he is no fan of the Coast Guard's plan to move it. He said the erosion rate isn't nearly as fast as people think.

"It makes no sense to move it now. It's got another hundred years there. They're destroying the historical aspect of that light."

Boonisar can remember visiting the light as an 8-year-old boy in 1947 and helping the lighthouse keeper polish its lanterns. Those ways died in 1986 when a family that served as lighthouse keepers there was replaced with \$50,000 worth of automated equipment.

The lighthouse keeper's house is located near the tower but farther inland. It is leased by the Massachusetts Lighthouse Association.

Until last year, the association had allowed a family to live in the house to operate a bed and breakfast. The plan never really made it off the ground, residents said, and the house remains empty today.